

*Christian Love, as exemplified by the  
first christian church in their HAVING  
ALL THINGS IN COMMON, placed  
in its true and just point of light.*

I N A

S E R M O N,

Preached at the Thursday-Lecture, in  
BOSTON, August 3d. 1773.

FROM ACTS 4. 32.

WHEREIN it is shown, that christian churches, in their character as such, are strongly obliged to evidence the reality of their christian love, though not by *having all things in common*, yet by making such provision, according to their ability, for their members in a state of penury, as that none of them may suffer through want of the things needful for the body; and that DEACONS are officers appointed by Christ to take care of his poor saints, making all proper distributions to them in his name, and as enabled hereto by the churches to which they respectively belong.

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## Advertisement.

THE following sermon is printed at the desire of some that heard it preached ; thinking it might happily tend to revive in *our churches that spirit of love towards the poor in communion with them*, which was the distinguishing characteristic of *christian churches* in the first age of the gospel. They also hoped, that a publication of this nature might lead DEACONS into clear and just sentiments of the *nature and importance* of their office, and churches into as just ones respecting their obligations to fill their hands for distributions to Christ's poor, as they are able, and there may be calls for it in the governing providence of God.

THEY, accordingly, recommend it to the serious perusal, especially, of *Deacons*, and the *Churches* to which they are related ; humbly leaving it with the " God of love" to give it desired Success.



*Having all things in Common, explained and improved.*



A C T S 4. 32.

*"And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart, and of one soul: neither said any of them, that ought of the things which he possessed were his own; but they had all things in common."*

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H E R E is no need, in order to introduce a discourse on these words, to take into previous consideration either the preceeding, or following context. They are an independent sentence, containing an account of the temper and conduct of the christian church at Jerusalem, in the beginning of the apostolic times. Says the inspired writer, they "were of one heart, and of one soul, and had all things in common".

W H A T I propose is, to dilate upon these words, that we may be let in a clear and just understanding of them; and, as I go along, to make the proper reflections

reflections upon what may be exhibited as their real truth.

THEY begin, "and the multitude of them that believed".—The persons here spoken of were "believers"; that is, converts to the christian faith. And they were converts from *Judaism*. For the gospel had not as yet been preached to the Gentile nations. The apostles, it is true, had, before this time, been commissioned by their Lord "to preach, in his name, repentance, and remission of sins, among ALL NATIONS;" as we read in Luk. 24. 47: But they were expressly ordered, in the words that immediately follow, to begin their ministry, in execution of their commission, "at *Jerusalem*; and to tarry there until they had been endued with power from on high"; that is, with miraculous power from the Holy Ghost.

WHY our Lord confined the labours of his apostles, for a while, within so narrow a compass as the city of *Jerusalem*, after he had commissioned them to preach the gospel to all the world, may be difficult to say. But could nothing else be said, it would be abundantly sufficient, at least to us who call ourselves christians, to say, "So it seemed good in his sight".

I MAY, with propriety, add here, it was an honor, a signal honor, to the city of *Jerusalem*, and to the Jewish nation in common, that the first christian church should consist of *Jews*, and be gathered at *Jerusalem*. And, at the same time, it illustrates that interrogatory appeal of the apostle Paul, in the first ver. of the 11th chapter of his epistle to the Romans, "hath God cast away his people"?



people"? Upon which he adds, "God forbid"! As if he had said, God hath not *wholly* "cast away his people". No; a number of them were believers in Christ, the promised Messiah, and so considerable a number, that they might be called "a multitude". So speaks the text.

"THE *multitude* of them that believed". And it is with great propriety that they are thus denominated. "About an hundred and twenty" only, it is true, was the number at first, as we read in the 1st chapter of the Acts; but, after the descent of the holy Ghost upon the apostles, in miraculous gifts, they were greatly increased. "Three thousand were added to them", in consequence of one sermon, preached by the apostle Peter, the record of which we have in the 2d chapter of Acts. In the chapter in which is my text, ver. 4, their number is said to be "about five thousand". And in the next chapter, v. 14, we read, that "believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women". This increase of believers was at Jerusalem, and of those who were converted from Judaism.

I MAY properly take occasion here to reflect with grief upon the state of the church of Christ at present, with respect to the additions that are made to it of those that "believe," so believe as that they "shall be saved". It cannot be now said, as in my text, "the multitude of them that believed". Blessed be God, there is yet a church of Christ, and there are in it believers in truth, believers unto life; and this, whether we consider the church in general, or as constituted of particular individual churches

churches. But the increase of converts is not now as it was when the apostles went forth in the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. There is at this day, and has been for a long time, yea for ages, an awful withdraw of that success, which, in the apostolic days, attended the preaching of the cross of Christ, Notwithstanding the revivals of the spirit of christianity at particular times, and in some particular places, the cause, in general, has been long languishing, and is, at present, in a sad, decaying, and almost dead condition.

It certainly is so in this Town and Land.— How small is the number of those, who give themselves up to God in Jesus Christ, to walk in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, with a becoming care of being blameless? We are visibly under great decays as to the life of religion. With what little success are the means of grace accompanied? What an awful unconcernedness does there appear in all sorts of persons about their souls, and the concerns of another world? How great is the luke-warmness and indifferency, even of christian professors? How general their spiritual sloth and negligence? And how many, what vast multitudes among us, are secure in their sins, unmindful of God, thoughtless of Christ, allowing themselves to “walk in the way of their own heart, and in the sight of their eyes”? Let us not be insensible of the lamentably bad state of religion among us. Let us be humble herefor, and seek to God to “pour out his spirit” upon us, to “revive the things that remain, and are ready to die”. We cannot unite in a more seasonable, pertinent prayer to the  
God

God of all grace than that, "Turn thou us again, O Lord God of hosts, cause thy face to shine, and we shall be saved".

THE text goes on, "they were of one heart, and of one soul". This may respect their unity in *sentiment* as well as *affection*. Such was their faith and such their love, that it might be said, they, had, as it were, "one soul". There were no disputings among them, no strife, no animosity. And, instead of hatred, they were filled with good will towards each other, shewing its reality in all the genuine exercises of christian kindness. They were in judgment, and affection, the same as if they had been animated with one common spirit.

THEY were one in *sentiment*, that is, with respect to the divine mission of Jesus Christ, his being the Messiah, and the only Saviour of men. This was the grand truth the apostles insisted on in their preaching, particularly in my context; and this, accordingly, was the great object of the faith of this "multitude". They embraced it as a sure truth, that Jesus who "had been crucified, and was raised from the dead", was "the Son of God"; and they were as "one" in this faith.

HAPPY this first christian church, so united in that faith which is the grand foundation of the religion of Jesus Christ! Happy, that they should, as "one" build, as the language of my context is, upon "the stone set at nought" by so many of the jewish builders, and that God had made the head of the corner; in whom there "is salvation, and in no other".

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THIS is the great band of christian union, that "unity in faith", which is recommended in the new-testament writings, and which was exemplified by the first christians.

It were to be wished, those who profess themselves christians, would preserve this unity in the bond of peace. Then would they cease from forming themselves into separate communities, on account of those differences in opinion which enter not into the essence of christianity, but are rather points of doubtful disputation. Then would the church of Christ be no longer a collection of contending sects, and party combinations, but "one body", cemented together, and united, not in the same sentiments about tything mint, annice, and cumming, or any other matters of comparatively small importance; but in that faith without which no man can be a christian, a christian in such a sense as that he may have good hope of entering into life eternal. This is the unity in sentiment, the oneness in faith, that is worthy to be desired, prayed for, and fought after, by all that are the friends of Christ, and the interest of his religion.

THIS multitude of primitive believers, were not only "one" in sentiment, but "one" in *affection* also. With respect to love, it might be said of them, they had, as it were, but "one heart, and one soul". They loved one another as they loved themselves; "yea, as Christ loved them". Their love was without dissimulation. It was not a pretence only, a meer empty verbal compliment; but a noble reality, appearing to be so by its operation in all the fruits of true christian benevolence. They "walked in love, even as Christ Jesus also walked".

They



They "abounded in love", both as an inward affection, and in all those outward acts that are the proper discoveries of such an affection. And it was eminently in this way that these first believers, and others also in after days, drew the attention, and excited the admiration, even of those who were unbelievers : for they have been heard to say, as their words are recorded by one and another of the ancient writers, "Behold, how the christians love one another ! How chearfully, how liberally, they do good to one another" !

AN example this, highly worthy of the imitation of all who would be owned, another day, as the followers of those who inherited that spirit, which was the peculiar glory of our common Master and Saviour. The law of love is eminently the law of Jesus Christ ; and we are obliged as christians to nothing, if we are not under solemn bonds to love one another. Love, in the first times of the gospel, was wrought into the very frame of the souls of believers ; and this they evidenced by their readiness to all the offices of christian kindness towards each other.—How different are most christians now from what they were then ! Can it be said, even of those of the same communion, that they are as "one" in affection ? May we not rather take to our selves words, and lament the flight of that spirit of love, which was once the distinguishing mark of those who were believers in Christ !

It is further added in my text, "neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own ; but they had all things in common". The things here said to be "had in common" must not be understood as extending to

a community in every thing. Such an explanation of the words would be an absurdity in reason, and a direct contradiction to the precepts of revelation. They ought therefore to be limited to such things only as might, in consistency with the rule of duty, be possessed and enjoyed in common. The inspired writer of my text has accordingly taken care to specify particularly "the things they had in common". Says he, in the following 34th and 35th verses, "as many as were possessed of lands, or houses, sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles feet; and distribution was made to every man according as he had need". To the like purpose, having said, in the 2d chapter of this same book of the Acts, ver. 44, "all that believed had all things in common", he goes on, in the next ver. to give us a distinct and full account of "the thing" he had said "believers had in common". His words are, "and sold their possessions and goods; and parted them to all men, as every man had need". It was therefore the worldly estate, the possessed houses and lands, of these believers, turned into money, that they all had the benefit of in common. There is nothing said, from whence it can be collected, that these believers enjoyed, or countenanced the enjoyment of any thing in common, that would infer a violation of the bonds those are under, who, as the scripture speaks, are no longer "twain, but mystically one in the Lord". Some may have interpreted this example of these first christians in such a latitude. But it may, without the least hesitation, be said, it was never so interpreted, unless  
by

by those, whose eyes were blinded by the rise of impure mists from a grossly carnalized heart.

THE only question of any importance here is, were christians, from the beginning, and all along to this day, obliged, in virtue of this example of the believers at Jerusalem, to sell their possessions, and put all in one stock for the common benefit of all? Some have imagined, that an affirmative answer to this question is the true one; but upon insufficient reason. And this I shall endeavour, in as concise a manner as I can, to make evident to you. In order whereto let it be observed,

THESE believers, constituting the church at Jerusalem, were not obliged, in consequence of any apostolic command, to make sale of their possessions, that they might have all things in common. We have no account of such a command. And should any affirm there was one, they would only declare their own imagination, not what is any where wrote in the inspired books. Nay, instead of being divinely taught, that these believers were commanded to sell their estates, that they might all live in common upon one stock, we are obviously led to think, that they were every one left at liberty to do in this matter as they judged to be right and fit. To this purpose are those words of the apostle Peter, in the chapter following my text, ver. 4, which he spake to Ananias with a direct reference to the sale he had made of his possession; "while it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thy own power"? Surely, he would not have said this, he could not have said it with propriety, or truth, if Ananias had been under the obligation of a command from Christ, conveyed

conveyed by his apostles, to part with his possession, and put the price into the common stock. Upon this supposition, how could his possession be so called "his own" as that he might not have sold it? and when he had sold it, how could the price of it be said to have been "in his own power"? It should seem demonstrable, from this application of the apostle Peter to Ananias, that the sale which these believers at Jerusalem made of their possessions, was a matter of their own free choice, not what they were absolutely bound to do in virtue of any requirement of Jesus Christ.

AND we may the rather be satisfied of this, as we no where read, in the new-testament, of any christian church, who "had all things in common", conformable to the example of the church at Jerusalem. And what is more, we no where, in the inspired books, find a *command*, directed to any christian church, or to any member belonging to it, obliging them to sell their possessions, that the whole community might be supported out of one common stock; which cannot be accounted for, had it been the will of Christ, that no one of his disciples should possess, as his own property, either house or land; but that every one, who professed faith in him, should, without the exception of a single person, sell his estate for the advantage of all in common.

It may be further worthy of notice, the new-testament-writers are so far from reducing all christians to a level, by putting them upon having all things in common, that they obviously suppose there actually was, and would be, a difference between them in point of outward circumstances. Hence they often speak of the members of this, and the other christian church



church under the characters of *rich* and *poor*; which would have been altogether improper, if christianity had destroyed this distinction, by obliging all that were believers to have all things in common. And not only do the apostolic writers speak of *rich* and *poor* in the christian church, but graft many of their instructions upon this difference there was in the worldly circumstances of its members. The *rich*, particularly, are applied to as such, and minded of the duty they are obliged to in this capacity. Says the apostle Paul, directing Timothy how to manage in his office as a gospel-minister, 1 Tim. 6. 17, "charge them that are *rich* in this world that they trust not in certain riches, but in the living God—that they do good, and be rich in good works". Where would be the pertinency of this charge to Timothy, if the supposition of rich men in the church of Christ was a contradiction to the gospel establishment? In this case, the direction to him must have been, say to such as are rich, sell your possessions, and cease being rich. But not a word to this purpose do we meet with here, or in any passage of scripture, in what is said to them that were rich.

It is still further observable, the apostle Paul, in writing to the Corinthian church, as "touching the ministring to the saints", gives them this instruction, 2. Cor. 9. 7. "Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity; for God loveth a chearful giver". Is this an injunction that will, in the least, comport with the supposition, that the individuals of this church had nothing of their own, but had all things in common? Every man, you see, is left  
to

to give according to the free purpose of his own heart: Only he is instructed to give with chearfulness, and liberality; and upon the encouragement mentioned in the foregoing verse, "This I say, he that soweth sparingly, shall reap sparingly; and he that soweth bountifully shall reap bountifully". But there would be no room for sowing sparingly, or bountifully, if no member of this church had any thing he could call his own, but whatever he possessed, more or less, must be thrown into one common stock for the benefit of all. Had this been the truth of fact, or an apostolic establishment, the direction, in this passage of scripture, is altogether unintelligible.

You will, perhaps, ask, if the practice of this first christian church at Jerusalem, in selling their possessions, and having all things in common, was not intended as an example obligatory on all other christian societies, why was it recorded? And why so recorded as to lead us into an opinion of their conduct as truly noble and benevolent?

THE answer is at once obvious, and I hope satisfactory. It is as follows. This first church, at the time when they came into this practice, were peculiarly situated. Perhaps, no church, from that day to this, has been in like circumstances. For it is to be observed, though, from the evidence that had been held out to their view, they admitted it into their hearts as a truth, that Jesus was the Son of God, and Saviour of the world, that he died, rose again, ascended up to heaven, and will come in the end of time to confer eternal life upon all his faithful followers; and though, in the esteem of the apostles, they were qualified, in consequence of this faith,

faith, and a profession of it, for baptism, and fellowship with believers in all acts of christian communion ; yet it cannot be supposed, but that, in this beginning of their faith, they should be imperfectly instructed in the nature, doctrines, and precepts of the gospel kingdom. Further teaching ; yea, a series of it was yet needful. They needed particularly to be guarded against the prejudices, errors, and corruptions of their former unconverted state, and to be more fully indoctrinated in the things pertaining to the kingdom of God, and Jesus Christ. And this, until a more regular state of things could be accomplished, it is at once evident, would take time, and bear hard upon those who had nothing to depend upon for a subsistence but the labor of their hands. Now, in such a situation of things, what more nobly benevolent than this conduct of the first believers, in having all things in common ? Especially, if it be remembered, as it ought to be, that this church was constituted chiefly of Jews that were not inhabitants at Jerusalem, but occasional comers there from a great variety of distant places. Hence we read, in the forecited 2d of the Acts, that, among the three thousand Jews, who were added to the church, at this time, there were Parthians, Medes, Elamites, dwellers in Mesopotamia, Judea, Pontus, Asia, and other places. And being thus occasionally at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, when the holy Ghost made his descent on the apostles, they were eye-witnesses of its marvellous effects, and had the opportunity of hearing the sermon then preached by the apostle Peter, under the inspiration of the Spirit ; upon which they were struck with

E conviction

conviction, professed faith in Christ, and were admitted, to fellowship, as disciples, in all acts of christian communion. But being at a great distance from their proper homes, they were incapable of providing for their own support, should they continue at Jerusalem; and yet, it cannot be supposed but that, upon their becoming converts to the faith of Christ, they should be desirous of tarrying here, as it was highly proper, if not absolutely necessary, they should, that they might be more fully instructed in the way of salvation through Jesus who was crucified. Besides, they might, by direction from the Holy Ghost, be influenced to continue here, that, being under the tuition of the apostles, and enjoying the advantage of christian communion in gospel ordinances, they might be formed for preachers to carry the glad tidings of salvation to the several nations from whence they came, and in this way be instrumental in propagating the religion of Jesus. In this situation of things, wherein could the believers at Jerusalem have more nobly manifested the warmth of their love to Christ, and the greatness of their affection for each other, than by saying, as in my text, that "nought of the things which they possessed were their own, but that all things should be had in common"? In like circumstances, the like conduct would be generous and noble, and would be the conduct of christians, if actuated by that benevolent principle, which reigned in these first believers, making them all of "one heart, and of one soul". But for any to plead, that this practice of those primitive christians should form a law, an established rule,



rule, obligatory upon all christians, in all ages, however differently circumstanced, would be highly absurd, and greatly hurtful in its tendency and operation.

NEVERTHELESS, this example of their unfeignedly generous love is very instructive to christians, considered both *individually*, and as united in *particular societies*. It is in this latter view of christians, only I shall consider the example in my text, as eminently instructive.

AND the instruction they are taught from it is, to take all due care, that such among them as are in necessitous circumstances, may be so far provided for, as to be preserved from suffering through want. Though no particular societies of christians are obliged, after the pattern of the church at Jerusalem, to sell what they possess, and throw all into one stock for the common support; yet they are, without all doubt, bound by their example to do their utmost, that none of their brethren in Christ, especially of the same community with themselves, may be suffered to drag on life unrelieved under the straits, distresses, and miseries of unavoidable poverty. And the obligation, from this example, is the more binding, as it co-incides with the known practice of all christian churches in apostolic times. \* It was their constant care to provide, by their charitable distributions, for the relief of their brethren in Christ under distressing circumstances, whether through poverty, or the unjust treatment of a wicked and unbelieving world. And they did this under apostolic guidance; yea, by express order from these

\* Vid. Rom. 15, 25, 26. 1 Cor. 26. 1, 2. 2 Cor. 8, 1, 2, 3. Heb. 6, 10.

these inspired teachers of the will of Christ. The practice of these primitive churches, thus circumstanced, is therefore obligatory upon all after churches; and while they copy after it, they may be assured, they will fall in with the mind of Christ, as their practice was founded on apostolic direction, which was infalibly right; because they were under the immediate guidance of the Spirit of truth.

The churches of Christ, it is acknowledged, were differently situated in that day from what they are in this. They were then the objects of the hatred and contempt of the civil magistrate, not of his paternal care and protection: Whereas the civil powers, in many places at least, are now on the side of christian communities, and profess a regard for them, and readiness to afford them their help.

THIS difference between the state of christians now, and in the times of the apostles, it must be owned, is a very great one in favor of christian churches at this day. But what is the natural, obvious deduction herefrom? Surely, it will not follow, that christian churches, because they are under a christian civil magistracy, are discharged from their obligations to christian charity. As our Savior has said, Mat. 26. 11, "The poor ye have always with you", that is, to furnish occasions for the exercise of charity, and to call to it. The necessities of those, who are of "the household of faith", may not at all times, and in all places, so loudly call for equally large distributions in order to their relief: But in all ages, and in all the churches of the saints, there will be a number, more or less, of helpless orphans,

orphans, widows, and poor people, who must be provided for, or subjected to all the miseries of a destitute condition in life.

BESIDES what has been offered, it may be worthy of special notice, the apostles of our Lord, under the extraordinary guidance of the Holy Ghost, appointed officers in the christian churches they founded, whose special business it was to take care of the charity of the churches they were respectively related to, and to make distribution of it according to the various wants of their several members. These officers are called, in the apostolic writings, DEACONS, and they have been distinguished by this name from that day to this.

The first deacons were constituted at Jerusalem, and the work assigned them was in part *extraordinary*, being adjusted to the *extraordinary circumstances* of the church there. This church, at this time, had one common stock, out of which they were all supplied. Deacons were accordingly appointed to "serve tables" † or, in other words, to make use of the churches money, which was deposited in their hands, not only in providing for the *Lora's table*, but such *other tables* as were necessary for the common support. : A work that required great wisdom, impartiality, candor, as well as labor, in order to a right and commendable discharge of it.

That which was *extraordinary* in the work of these deacons, the support of all out of one common stock, soon ceased ; but taking care of the helpless poor members of Christ still continued the duty of every church, and will continue to be their duty to the end of the world. And, upon this foundation

† See the account at large in the 6th Chapter of the Acts.

foundation, the deacon's office became a *perpetual* one in the church. All the churches, in apostolic times, that were set in order, were furnished with *Deacons*, as well as *Pastors*. Hence the apostle Paul inscribes his epistle to the Philippians in that style, "to all the saints in Christ Jesus, with the Bishops, or Pastors, and *Deacons*". And in his first epistle to Timothy, which was intended for the direction of all churches, in all ages, he particularly specifies the qualifications of those who are fit to be *Deacons*, and gives direction that such only should be put into office.

It is from hence evident, that the Deacon's office is a *perpetual* one, and that all the churches of Christ, in succession thro' all ages, should be furnished with them. And why? Principally, and above all, that, as trustees of the churches, and as officers of Jesus Christ, they might employ themselves in ministering to the poor saints. But how should they do this, unless they be enabled to it? And how should they be enabled, but from the charitable distributions of the churches whose officers they respectively are, under Christ, the great head over all? The appointment of Deacons to take care, that the poor saints be relieved and helped, is, in true construction, a solemn law of Christ, obliging the churches who chuse them to put it in their power, as God shall give ability, to answer this charitable intention of their office. Surely, this office in the church would not have been constituted, if it had been a needless, useless one! And useless, as to the main end of its institution, it must certainly be, if the churches are not bound, by the authority of Christ,



Christ, to a due care to fill their hands for distribution to charitable and pious purposes. \*

IN short, either the Deacon's office is an ordinance of Jesus Christ, or it is not. If it is not, why do our churches, in solemn form, chuse men out of their number to take upon them this office? They must be supposed to esteem *Deacons*, officers of divine appointment, or they prophanely mock God when they elect them as such. If they are officers

\* My late worthy colleague, the Rev. Mr. Foxcroft, in his sermon preached at the ordination of a Deacon, though dead yet speaks to you, in the following very pertinent words.

" This officer (meaning the Deacon) stands in the house of  
" God a constant monitor to the assembly, of their duty to  
" honour the Lord with their substance. And the church,  
" that elect him, do hereby practically contract with him,  
" that they will own him in the execution of his office,  
" find him suitable employment in his station, and supply him,  
" as they are able, for a liberal distribution to the necessities  
" of saints. I cannot but look on it a gross incongruity,  
" not to say a trifling formality, and mockery of a divine  
" institution, to put men, by a solemn church-vote, in the  
" name of God, under the character of *Deacons*, and yet  
" not appoint them over their proper business", nor take  
" the necessary methods to furnish them for "using their  
" office well".—He adds a little onwards "If the church  
" did their duty "concerning the collection for the saints,  
" every one contributing as God hath prospered them", there  
" would be a sufficiency of work for the officers Christ has  
" instituted to "serve tables." None, methinks, could then,  
" with any colour of reason, scruple the propriety of a so-  
" lemn ordination of them. And as for them, how would it  
" encourage their hearts, to see the churches, they respectively  
" serve, taking a proper care, that they may be "thoroughly  
" furnished unto all good works" for the house of their God,  
" and the offices thereof! How gladly would they receive  
" the gift, and take upon them the fellowship of ministering  
" unto the saints"!—Thus he.

officers of Christ's appointment, the churches who chuse them are most certainly obliged to acknowledge them in this character, by enabling them, as they have ability, to afford all needed help to "the saints that are in Christ Jesus". This is the great end of their appointment; this is the business in special they are set over: And for churches to elect them to manage this business, and carry into execution this great and good end of their office, and, at the same time, to take little or no care to furnish them with ability heretofore, is an inconsistency in conduct that cannot easily be accounted for. And yet, this inconsistency most of our churches are justly chargeable with.

It is I suppose, the truth, in regard of all our churches, that they have *Deacons*, and of their own election; and this, when solemnly met together in the name of the Lord. And is it not as real a truth, with respect to the most of them, that their *Deacons* sustain rather the *name* of their office, than the thing itself; having little or nothing to do that is proper to the principal end of their institution by Christ? May it not be justly said, that too generally, throughout the land, their main business is to provide for, and serve at, the sacramental table? As for Christ's poor, they are no more enabled, by the churches they are related to, to make distributions for their relief, than if they sustained no office in the church of God. Is this as it ought to be? May it not rather be said, that such churches are grossly wanting in those discoveries of christian affection, which were so conspicuous in the church at Jerusalem, and all the other churches we read of in the new-testament-books.

It will, perhaps, be pleaded here, our civil rulers have empowered the several Towns, within their jurisdiction, to raise such moneys as may be judged necessary for the support of the poor, and to appoint persons to take care, that these moneys be disposed of, so as to answer the good end for which they are raised; in consideration whereof, the churches are excused from those charities, which would enable their *Deacons* to do that which is done in other ways.

THE answer is at once obvious. The laws empowering our several towns to provide for the support of the poor, respect the *poor in common*, of whatever denomination, be their character as it may; not distinguishing any on account of their *membership in the church of Christ*: Whereas, it is the requirement of the gospel of the blessed God, that christian churches particularly regard the *poor saints*; taking all due care, that those, who are members of the same mystical body with themselves, should be so far helped as not to live in suffering circumstances, through want of the things that are needful for the body. And, if any of their members are in real necessity, their charitable assistance is what they are as certainly obliged to, as christians were in the first, or any other, period of the christian church. Their living in a christian country, where provision is made by law for the relief of poor people in *general*, may make a difference as to the quantum of the charity, that may be proper and suitable; but it makes none at all as to the thing itself, where there is real need of it. And, indeed, if the provision that is made by the law in any place for the support of the poor, *in common*, can-

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cels the obligations of the churches to make provision for *those of their own body*, who are in necessitous circumstances, it totally sets aside the *Deacon's office*, though an apostolic appointment in the name of Jesus Christ. What need of *Deacons* in the church of God, if Christ's poor are not to be the special objects of their care? Why should the churches chuse them into office, if they are excused from putting any thing into their hands for a distribution for the relief of the *saints*? The plain truth is, no civil constitution can vacate an institution of Jesus Christ. And as *Deacons* are officers of his appointment, and chosen by the churches as such, they are solemnly bound, and by their own choice too, in compliance with what they professed esteem the will of Christ, to own them in the business they are called to, and set over, namely, that of ministring to the wants of those, *in special*, who are of "the household of faith". And that they may be properly supplied, as officers in the kingdom of Christ, and in his name, for the execution of the benevolent trust reposed in them, it is, without all doubt, the incumbant duty of the churches of which they are respectively *Deacons*, to endeavour, as they have ability, to put it in their power to relieve their poor members, as there may be occasion for, and calls to it, in the alwise, righteous government of providence.

SOME of our churches, thanks be to God, have something of a stock, or fund, owing to the pious and charitable legacies of those, who were concerned that the *poor disciples of Christ* might, in *his name*, and by *his officers* in the church, be taken care



care of. But it will not be pretended, that any fund, in any of our churches, will afford that which is sufficient for the relief of all belonging to them, that are needy and destitute : And what is lacking, this way, ought to be made up in some other ; or even these churches will fall greatly short of their duty, and leave their Deacons unable to answer, in a commendable measure, the good intention of their office.

WHAT some individuals in our churches have done, or may still do, in charities to the poor in general, or the poor of those christian communities of which they themselves are a part, is known to God, and their own consciences. But may it not be justly questioned, whether any of our churches, as such, have taken that care to enable their Deacons, as Christ's officers, and in his behalf, to make those communications to his needy disciples, as they had ability to do, and ought to have done ? Had the constituent members of our several churches been as ready to communicate, that their brethren in Christ, conflicting with the miseries of poverty, might be relieved and helped, as they have been to expend their money for that which profiteth not, would so many of them have so often been pinched with hunger, and cold, and suffered to groan under distress, through want, I do not say of the conveniences and comforts, but of even the necessities of life ? Should I not speak the truth, if I should affirm, that no visible saint, no member in any of our churches, would suffer for want of what is needful for the body, if we spared for their relief a small part only of that which is laid out for rich furniture

furniture for our houses, in costly apparel to deck our bodies, and in luxurious variety to cover our tables? Should each one that is a member of the church of Christ lay his hand upon his heart, and declare the genuine dictates of conscience, would he not be obliged to own, that he had needlessly, might I not say sinfully, spent that, which, if he had laid up in store for the purposes of charity and piety, would have made the hearts of many to sing for joy, who have been oppressed, and over-burdened with the weight of difficulties and straits, arising from the poverty of their condition? Our churches, my brethren, have lost, in a great measure, the spirit of the primitive churches of Christ; their spirit of love, operating in all the offices of charitable goodness, which distinguished them from other men, and were as a mark, or badge, by which they were known to be believers in him whom God has sent to be the Savior of the world. We are too generally become lovers of ourselves, lovers of the gaities, the vanities, the amusements, and fashionable follies of the degenerate age we live in. The very best of us are too much conformed to this present evil world, and suffer it so to engross our affection, as that we have but little, very little, left to shew it self in christian acts of kindness and beneficence to the saints that are in Christ Jesus.

It were to be wished our churches were now, as they were in the apostles days, "one in heart and affection", churches towards each other, and every church towards every member belonging to it. And that we may be "provoked" to this union in love, evidencing its reality in works of kindness  
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and charity, as their may be occasion, I shall briefly propose to your consideration the following things, with the mentioning of which I shall conclude the present discourse.

THE first thing worthy of special notice is, that the faith which constitutes men christians in truth, and love to their fellow-brethren in Christ, not the pretence of love, but its reality, are so far connected together in the sacred books, as to lead us most obviously into the thought, that they are, and ought always to be, inseperable concomitants. Turn to what Paul says to the church in Ephesus, 1st chap. 15 ver. To the like purpose he writes to the church at Coloss, 1st chap. 4th ver. The same connection of love we find, in his 1st Epist. to the Theffalonians 1st chap. 3 ver. So in his 2d epist. 1 chap. 3d ver. I might refer you to a great number of other texts, in which faith in Christ, and love to the brethren, the saints, the household of faith, are linked together, as though they could not be disjoined, but would ever accompany each other. And, in truth, it is of the very essence of faith, that faith by which "the just do live", to shew itself in love, not only to God, and Christ, but to the christian brotherhood, not in word only, but in true genuine deeds of unfeigned hearty affection; insomuch, that we may assure ourselves, if our faith is not accompanied with this practical love, it is nothing better than that empty dead faith, of which the apostle James says, "it profiteth not".

It may be again worthy of consideration, the apostolical writers present to the view of believers in Christ Jesus, such an idea of their relation to each other

other as must powerfully tend to excite and draw forth their love to one another, if their faith is of the right sort, and in exercise. As the apostle Paul, in the 2d chap. of his epist. to the Ephes. represents the matter, we have "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all, who is above all, and thro' all, and in all" that are disciples in truth. We have all been "called to one hope", we are "one mystical body", and are actuated by one and the same spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ. We are all "heirs according to the hope of eternal life, heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ to the incorruptible inheritance in heaven". We expect to be associated in another world, and to live there, in one grand community, united in love to one another; and eternally joining as one in "ascribing blessing and honor to him that sitteth on the throne, and to the Lamb". Can we have a realising faith in these truths of God, as we must have to denominate us christians, and not feel in our hearts the working of affection towards each other; affection that will shew itself in all christian offices of charitable kindness? It is impossible.

It may be said yet farther, the gospel-motives to christian love, in practice, as well as principle, are such as cannot easily be withstood, where there is the exercise of faith in a suitable degree. We are called to no act of love and goodness to the disciples of Christ, but what we shall be abundantly rewarded for in the coming world. A cup of cold water only given to a disciple, in the name of a disciple, and from love to Christ, and in obedience to him, shall in no wise lose its reward. The more bountifully



bountifully we sow, the more bountifully we shall reap.—What better use, what higher interest, can we put our money to, than by lending it to the Lord, for the use of his poor? It is the intire want of faith, or the weakness of it, or the not allowing it its proper exercise, that shuts our hands from the most liberal distributions to the purposes of christian charity. Could we be wanting upon this head, if we really and fully believed, that the good God would amply repay us whatever we should advance for the help of the saints, if not in this world, most assuredly in that which is to come.

ANOTHER most powerfully affecting consideration to engage our practical love towards our brethren in Christ is, that he will esteem what we do to them as if done to himself. For they are members of that very body of which he is the Head; they are mystically one with him. It is in consideration of this union, that he says, as in the 24th of Matthew, “inasmuch as ye have done it to one of the least of these my brethren ye have done it to me”. Do we really believe, that, if we charitably relieve a brother in Christ, he will accept the kindness as done to himself? It is difficult to conceive, how we should, in this case, refrain ourselves herefrom. Our faith in this amazing truth must be weak, or rather not in present exercise, or it would open both our hearts and hands in communications of christian kindness.

I SHALL only say further, deeds of charitable goodness to the poor suffering members of

of the church of Christ, are mentioned by name in the account the scripture gives us of the process of the great and general judgment; and those only are pronounced "blessed, and bid to inherit the kingdom prepared before the foundation of the world, who have given meat to the hungry, and drink to the thirsty, cloaths to the naked, and help to the sick, and distressed". If then we would hope to be acquitted at the bar of the future judgment, and have entrance ministered to us into the kingdom of Christ that is above, we must put on bowels of mercy, be kind to one another, tender-hearted, ever being in readiness, according to our ability, to do good to "the household of faith": So shall we, of the mercy of God, through Jesus Christ, be crowned with immortality and honour in the coming world,

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